

Promoting the Dominion: Records and the Canadian Immigration Campaign, 1872-1915

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In his memoir, *Confessions of a Tenderfoot* (1913), Ralph Stock — traveller, journalist, and sometime homesteader — provided a lively picture of Edwardian London. At the turn of the century, he wrote, the metropolis was

plastered from end to end with flaring posters, representing fields of yellow grain and herds of fat stock tended by cowboys picturesquely attired in costumes that have never been heard of outside the covers of a penny dreadful. . . . Unctuous gentlemen met you in the street with six page pamphlets, imploring you to come to such and such an address and hear of the fortunes in store for the man of initiative who would take the plunge and emigrate to Canada. What chance was there, then, of the average city youth, cooped in an office from nine o'clock until six, resisting such an appeal to the spirit of adventure? [pp. 1-2]

Such were one immigrant's impressions of the aggressive, million-dollar advertising campaign waged by the Canadian government and allied agencies prior to the First World War.

Advertising, as many historians have recognized, was a major part of Canada's immigration programme during the boom years of settlement. Yet few historians have pondered the advertisements themselves. Little attention has been paid to the planning and production of the pamphlets and posters which emigrants such as Ralph Stock found so alluring. Scant attention has been paid to the agencies and the individuals who were responsible for distributing this material. Nor for that matter have archivists shown much interest in the subject, despite the fact that the promotional records which have survived are now to be found almost exclusively in archival institutions. Perhaps this is because pamphlets, posters, and the like are dismissed as ephemera: quaint, colourful, but of little intrinsic value as historical documents. Whatever the reason, a careful study of government immigration records reveals that contemporary advertisements were not hastily conceived effusions, scattered indiscriminately among the gullible masses overseas. On the contrary, such advertisements were generally well-designed, well-defined documents: not only were they an important

part of a carefully orchestrated recruiting campaign, but they were also key elements in a communications network that was crucial to the growth of the Dominion.

Before turning to the promotional activities of the Dominion Immigration Branch, it is necessary to establish the focus of this paper. Since the United Kingdom provided Canada with the largest number of immigrants during the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, and since Canadian immigration agents were more active there than anywhere else during the period, this paper will focus on campaigns that were waged solely in Britain. Similarly, since the Canadian government was most eager to direct immigrants to newly opened, sparsely settled parts of the country, special attention will be paid to advertisements pertaining to British Columbia and the prairie West. This paper is not, however, concerned with British immigration or the settlement process in Western Canada *per se*, but with the records that were used to attract immigrants and to facilitate settlement. Specifically, the essay will consider the nature of promotional records: it will examine the way in which certain documents were created, how particular types of records developed, and how they were deployed. In so doing, this paper may serve as a contribution to that new — and most welcome — field of archival scholarship in Canada: the history of the record.

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Officially sponsored advertising campaigns were unusual in the early part of the nineteenth century. Most of the colonies relied upon agents from the various land companies, shipping lines, or charitable emigration societies to provide them with publicity overseas. It was increasingly apparent, however, that independent colonization agents were no match for the army of agents representing American interests in the United Kingdom, so in 1854, the Province of Canada took the first steps towards organizing a sustained recruiting campaign. Travelling agents were sent to Britain with instructions to distribute a large number of newly printed promotional brochures. Five years later, Canada's first "stationary emigration agent" was dispatched to Liverpool, where he opened an office and proceeded to place advertising notices concerning Canada in selected British periodicals. The results of these early efforts were disappointing. The overwhelming majority of British emigrants continued to make their way to American, rather than to Canadian or Maritime ports. Of those who did sail for colonial ports, most continued on to America; the remainder, in too many cases, were paupers, unskilled labourers, and other types deemed to be "unsuitable" immigrant stock. The costs of the agents' activities also alarmed the Bureau of Agriculture, the department then responsible for immigration, and in 1863 most of the emigration agents were recalled. Nevertheless, as Paul Gates pointed out in his pioneering article, "the experiences and errors of the earlier campaigns were of much assistance in the later movement [to attract British immigrants]."¹ That movement began a few years later, after Confederation.

¹ Paul W. Gates, "Official Encouragement to Immigration by the Province of Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 15 (March 1934), p. 38.

By the terms of the British North America Act (30-31 Victoria, c. 3, s. 95), authority to deal with matters pertaining to immigration was vested jointly with the federal and provincial governments. In such matters, the laws of the Dominion took precedence and in practice the federal government always conducted most of the work associated with immigration and colonization. From 1867 to 1892 this work was the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture. In the first year of Confederation, the department spent some \$36,000, the largest part of its budget, on immigration services. Much of this expenditure, however, was devoted to quarantine stations, to reception centres, and to the distribution and settlement of immigrants who had already arrived in Canada. Not until 1872 did the department launch a properly organized, adequately funded recruiting campaign.

Guidelines for the campaign were established at the federal-provincial Immigration Conference held in Ottawa on 19-22 September 1872. The conference had been called, at Sir John A. Macdonald's request, to map out a plan of action with respect to overseas recruiting. Specifically, he hoped to prevent intergovernmental jealousies and jurisdictional disputes between the Dominion agents and those from the provinces. Several of the provinces had already stationed agents in Britain under the terms of an arrangement reached between Ottawa and the provinces in 1869,² and on several occasions these agents were found providing contradictory information or making rival claims for their respective districts. Such competitive advertising only confused prospective emigrants and, as the Minister of Agriculture explained, undermined a crusade which was of national importance. The provincial delegates concurred and at the close of the conference they agreed to a series of resolutions which were intended to provide for a common front. The resolutions most pertinent to our discussion are as follows:³

1. The Dominion will maintain an efficient system of immigration agency in the United Kingdom, on the continent of Europe, and if deemed necessary, elsewhere beyond Canada.
2. [The federal government] will disseminate such information with reference to the Dominion generally and to Manitoba and the North West Territory in particular as may be deemed necessary for the advancement of immigration.
3. The several Provinces will maintain an efficient system of Immigration Agency within their respective territories. . . .
4. [The Provinces] may appoint such immigration agents in Europe and elsewhere, beyond Canada, as they may think proper, and such agents, on requisition to that effect, will be duly accredited by the Dominion Government.
5. Each Province will disseminate such information as it may deem requisite for the advancement of immigration, and to that end

2 David E. Smith, "Provincial Representation Abroad: The Office of Agent General in London," *Dalhousie Review* 55 (Summer 1975), pp. 316-17, 325n.

3 Canada, *Sessional Papers* (hereafter *SP*), 1872 (No. 2A), pp. 12-13.

will furnish to the Department of Agriculture and to the Emigration agents of the Dominion full information as to its system of settlement and colonization . . . [along] with all other information, and all documents deemed requisite for the advancement of immigration.

The policies and intentions embodied in these resolutions, plus a general sense of determination to develop a cooperative strategy with respect to immigration, provided the basis for the Dominion's recruiting campaigns for the next fifty years.

A few months prior to the conference, the Canadian government had taken another important step by establishing a permanent headquarters for its British operations. Previously, recruiting offices had perambulated between Liverpool, Wolverhampton, and London, despite the fact that the managers of the office were known as "stationary" agents. In 1872 it was decided to establish the office permanently in London in order to be close to Parliament, the national press, and, of no little concern, the offices of rival colonies. The office was located initially in a small building in Adam Street off the Strand. The premises soon proved inadequate for the scope of the new operations and in 1876 it was moved to a larger, more prominent site at 31 Queen Victoria Street, not far from St. Paul's Cathedral and the Bank of England. Reflecting the spirit of cooperation established at the Immigration Conference four years earlier, Canada's new headquarters also provided accommodation for the representatives — or, as they came to be styled, the Agents General — of Ontario and Quebec.⁴

William Dixon, in charge of the new London office, was the Dominion's senior immigration agent. He was responsible for overseeing the work of subagents in Belfast, Dublin, Glasgow, and Liverpool, as well as the work of the "special" or "temporary" agents who from time to time were sent from Canada to carry out additional recruiting drives. Dixon was also responsible for coordinating the agencies and operations which were later established on the Continent. The position he occupied was, in some respects, prestigious for, prior to the appointment of Canada's first High Commissioner in 1880, he enjoyed a quasi-ambassadorial status. But it was not a highly paid post (salaries were in the region of \$1,000 annually and remained at that level until the turn of the century) and it was one that involved many months of unremitting work.

Permanent immigration agents were required to keep their offices open from 9:30 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. six days a week; they were expected to handle a large volume of correspondence from prospective settlers and investors, to write, print, and publish thousands of posters and brochures, and to maintain, on a more or less continuous basis, advertising notices in British post offices and railway

4 For financial reasons, the Maritime provinces did not open permanent agencies in London until the late 1880s; Manitoba and the new prairie provinces did not do so until much later. In the 1870s, the Maritimes were content to let the Dominion government represent their interests; besides, many of the "special agents" appointed on a temporary basis by the Minister of Agriculture were Nova Scotia and New Brunswick men. British Columbia, eschewing the Dominion's offer of accommodation, rented its own premises in Lime Street. The B.C. government did, however, eagerly accept an annual grant of five thousand dollars, appropriated for immigration purposes, from the federal government.

stations. They were required to keep a log, showing enquiries received and action taken, and every few months they were required to submit extensive reports to the Minister of Agriculture in Ottawa. These were just a few of their duties. With the assistance of a small staff — which, prior to the 1890s rarely numbered more than two or three — the agents were expected to maintain an attractive reference room adjacent to their office. The room was to be tastefully decorated and well-stocked with immigration brochures, Canadian periodicals, and other relevant publications. The agents were expected to display a large map of the Dominion and to have maps, statistical tables, and other information pertinent to specific areas of the country. They had to be up-to-date on steamship fares and railway schedules; they were required to be able to quote the current cost of living in Canada, land regulations, customs duties, and medical requirements for immigrants; they were expected to help enforce Canadian and Imperial statutes concerning immigration and maritime law. Indeed, in Norman Macdonald's words, "so varied and complex were their duties that they might almost be regarded as walking encyclopedias."⁵

As well as being knowledgeable, agents had to be diplomatic and gregarious. They were expected to maintain friendly relations with local government officials, the clergy, and with philanthropic organizations such as the British and Colonial Emigration Society. It was equally important to establish good relations with the army of agents who represented Allan's, Elder, Dempster, and the other principal carriers in Britain. At the same time, Dixon, his associates, and their successors, were expected to be vigilant in monitoring the local press and the activities of agents from the United States, Argentina, and the colonies of Australia and South Africa. They were always to be ready to rebut any unfavourable references to the Dominion and to have on hand ammunition with which to deflate the blaims of their rivals.

Yet while engaging in the aggressive, highly competitive campaign for British immigrants, Dominion agents were expected to be dispassionate, objective, and gentlemanly. In fact, they were enjoined by Ottawa to refrain from offering direct advice to intending immigrants, on the grounds that such advice might raise false expectations or be construed to be a quasi-official guarantee of success. As John Lowe, Principal Secretary at the Department of Agriculture, instructed an agent who was about to depart for England in 1872: "It will be your duty to give both statistical and practical information respecting the Dominion . . . always taking care in any statements you make touching the probable success of intending emigrants to this country, to avoid exaggeration and not to render yourself liable to the reproach of having misled."⁶

When they were not attending to their offices, Canadian agents spent much of their time on the road giving lectures on the benefits of emigration. Their itineraries usually took them to small provincial towns and villages, for the Dominion was primarily interested in recruiting market gardeners, farmers, and agricultural labourers. It was an exhausting schedule, involving long hours of

5 Norman Macdonald, *Canada: Immigration and Colonization, 1841-1903* (Toronto, 1966), p. 41.

6 Public Archives of Canada (hereafter PAC), Records of the Department of Agriculture, RG 17, A 1 2, vol. 1503, microfilm reel T-115, John Lowe to Edwin Clay, 20 February 1872.

travel and many nights in country towns that were not notable for their hospitality. "Tramping the provinces" was, nevertheless, considered to be one of the most effective ways of promoting the Dominion outside the metropolis.

The agents were required to keep detailed diaries of their journeys and, on returning to their offices, to submit detailed reports to their superiors at home. It is apparent from these reports that the agents, like travelling salesmen, developed a routine. Gilbert Malcolm Sproat, British Columbia's Agent General and a close associate of Dixon, provided a good description of the routine in a report he filed in 1873:⁷

Visit a district — find best centres — appoint local agent, hitherto generally been Allan's. (These Agents are of all classes — Bill posters, Auctioneers, Stationers, Newspaper proprietors, etc.) Next, see about Lecture room — this is often a difficulty — sometimes none can be had — generally room has to be hired. . . . Next, see leasing gentleman in the place and get a good Chairman, not always easy. Next, make acquaintance of the Press.

After the lecture, remain one or two days for consultation — on market days, if possible. . . .

The "good Chairman," mentioned by Sproat, were usually local squires, aldermen, or clergymen — individuals who would lend authority and respectability to the agent's lecture. Meeting places were usually schools, temperance halls, or mechanics' institutes. As for what might be called "follow-up," Sproat reported that it was his practice "in some localities, to insert a few advertisements referring to the late lecture" in the press. More was expected of the Dominion agents. They were required to have their lectures reprinted in full in the local papers or to have their text published in pamphlet form.

The costs of these promotional treks were strictly regulated: vouchers were to be submitted for all expenditures, along with schedules showing mileage and railway fares. These were then scrutinized by government auditors who, ever parsimonious and mistrustful, were supplied with up-to-date copies of Bradshaw's Railway Guides. *Per diem* expenses were also kept to a minimum, so as to prevent any lavish or promiscuous spending — a policy which Sproat, for one, found vexing. In a letter to his superior, the Provincial Secretary of British Columbia, he noted that the average cost of giving a lecture — including railway fares, hire of halls, hotels, meals, etc. — was approximately three pounds or about twelve dollars. "This," he grumbled, "is avoiding first class on railways, going to second class hotels, and scrimping in every way. . . ." On another occasion, he complained that his sixteen shilling *per diem* allowance compared pitifully to the rate of twenty or thirty shillings enjoyed by "Commercial travellers from good houses." The latter were able to "go first class and generally have wine in the Commercial room [of their hotels] for dinner."⁸

7 Provincial Archives of British Columbia (hereafter PABC), Records of the Provincial Secretary, GR 526, vol. 7, file 2, Sproat to John Ash, 1 May 1873.

8 *Ibid.*

Sproat and his colleagues, in contrast, had to seek their meals elsewhere (often in pubs) or forgo the balm of the grape with the evening repast. But such were the sacrifices one made for the public service.

Before setting out on their tours, immigration agents would arm themselves with a large map, which folded up into a specially designed waterproof case. They would also be provided with a large number of publications or, as we might call them, promotional documents. Posters — advertising lectures and the advantages of Canada — were displayed in railway stations and post offices; emigrants' handbooks — the most expensive items in the agents' arsenals — were distributed judiciously to the press or to those who were seriously contemplating emigration; handbills, leaflets, and brochures were broadcast widely to anyone who would receive them.

Much of the literature originated from the federal Department of Agriculture. By 1880, the department was issuing a dozen different titles, including *Information and Advice for Immigrants* (first edition, 1875), the *Canada Handbook* (first edition, 1877), and the *Handy Book for Immigrants* (1880). The department was also responsible for the *Emigrant's Almanac* (1875) and several other titles emanating from its London agency, as well as upwards of twenty separate publications issued by the various provinces.⁹

These publications were written by a variety of authors. Some were written — or rather compiled — by clerks within the department, using data supplied by immigration agents stationed at different points within Canada.¹⁰ Other tracts were written by professional authors such as Catharine Parr Traill, whose *The female emigrant's guide and hints on Canadian housekeeping* (1858) was circulated by the department for many years.¹¹ Some of the pamphlets were written by Dominion agents in Britain, while others — regarded by the department as being the most influential — were comprised of letters sent to relatives in the Old Country from contented settlers in Canada.

Publishing this literature consumed a sizeable portion of the department's budget and, as might be imagined, there was considerable jockeying on the part of printers for lucrative government contracts. However, because the brochures were produced in such large numbers (print runs of three hundred thousand were not uncommon, even in the 1870s), the actual cost of each brochure was small. The *Canada Handbook*, for example, cost the department just over five cents a copy to produce. Later publications, using coloured illustrations and

9 *SP*, 1880 (No. 112), pp. 2-4.

10 See, for example, RG 17, vol 515, General correspondence from John Jessop, Immigration Agent, Victoria, B.C., 1-10 December 1886. Jessop and his colleagues at other points across the country were required to file schedules showing "Retail Prices of the Ordinary Articles of Food and Raiment required by the Working Classes," "Average rates of Wages," etc. with the Department of Agriculture each year. The information they supplied subsequently appeared in the annual editions of the *Official Handbook for Immigrants*.

11 Gates, "Official Encouragement," p. 26; *SP*, 1873 (No. 1) Public Accounts, p. 99.

maps, tended to be more expensive, although even then costs were remarkably low: as late as 1901, the average cost of the 1.5 million pamphlets distributed by the Immigration Branch was still less than six cents a copy.¹²

The sheer volume of the literature posed unprecedented problems for the Agriculture Department and, indeed, for many other branches of the government. Initially, the department had all of its publications delivered to its offices in the East Block of the Parliament Buildings. But as the volume and the number of publications increased, the department soon found itself literally buried in promotional material. There was also the problem of packing the material in such a way that it could be forwarded to Britain. This problem — minor in retrospect, monumental to those concerned — involved elements of standardization, inventory control, and records management. Specifically, the individuals responsible for receiving and forwarding the literature complained when the brochures, pamphlets, and so on were not of a standard size, were not clearly labelled, or were not tied in regulation bundles. “The difficulty of doing this work properly in a dark and drafty passage in the basement [of the Parliament Buildings] can readily be understood,” an immigration official declared at the turn of the century. While his staff were struggling with documents in the basement, stuffing them into large wooden crates and nailing the crates shut, the clerical staff upstairs were complaining about the noise. Eventually, the department established a policy whereby “all hammering [was] to be done either in the morning *before 9:30*, at *12:30*, or *after office hours*.”¹³ How the shipping clerks received this memo is not recorded.

Problems also had to be overcome in moving the literature to Britain. Special arrangements had to be made with the Post Office department, which complained frequently that it was being swamped by the Immigration Branch, and with cartage firms, railways, and shipping companies. Once the material reached Britain, it had to be distributed to the various agents scattered throughout the country. The agents, in turn, had to ensure that the documents were seen by the right people. This was not always an easy task, even with the help of local bill-posters and messenger boys. Moreover, an agent could never be certain that the lad he had hired to distribute the material had actually done the job. But Charles Foy, Canada’s man in Belfast in the early 1870s, had his own way of minimizing the risks. He simply hired a dog-cart and drove behind the bill-sticker, counting the posters and placards as he went. On other occasions, when Foy was unable to follow his men, he had them produce certificates from the constabulary of the district, certifying that the advertisements had indeed been posted.¹⁴

Contrary to general belief, the brochures distributed by the Dominion agents were not effusive tracts, laden with exaggerated statements and unrealistic claims. Most were decidedly sober in tone, for the government adopted the same attitudes towards printed advertisements as it did towards immigration lecturers:

12 *SP*, 1880 (no. 112), pp. 2-4; PAC, Immigration Branch Records, RG 76, vol. 119, file 23143, pt. 1, microfilm reel C-4783, Frank Pedley to James Smart, 17 April 1902.

13 *Ibid.*, C.M. Badgley to P.G. Keyes, 5 January 1900.

14 *SP*, 1872 (no. 2A), p. 86.

“The Canadian Government does not expect, nor will it permit, any other than the most honourable and fair means to be employed for the promotion of emigration.”¹⁵ Of course, the term “honourable” was relative and somewhat elastic. Thus, Agent Foy had no qualms about blanketing Northern Ireland with copies of letters from “disappointed emigrants in Nebraska,” on the occasion of a visit by a rival agent representing that state.¹⁶ Neither was J.H. Pope, the Minister of Agriculture in 1884, averse to hiring literary hacks in Canada to write letters to English newspapers.¹⁷ (The letters, which gave the appearance of being spontaneously and independently conceived, extolled the wonders of the Canadian North West.) Nor, for that matter, were some of the provincial agents timid about presenting a somewhat fanciful impression of their locales. G.M. Sproat of British Columbia is a case in point.

In the early 1870s, Sproat decided to produce an illustrated handbook for emigrants; however, although he searched extensively in London, he was unable to find a picture of Victoria that, in his opinion, did the city justice. Accordingly, he “doctored” a contemporary lithograph of the city, by removing the Indian village from the picture, by widening the harbour, and by making other little improvements, so as to make “a lightsome view” of the provincial capital [see figures 1 and 2]. Unable to find a suitable picture of the ranching districts of the Cariboo, he likewise appropriated an engraving of some other area which he then captioned as the spot in question. Sproat afterwards reported that he had made these alterations in order to “enliven” the handbook and convey a more pleasing image to prospective settlers.¹⁸ He was not reprimanded by his government for so doing.

Certainly, many official propagandists employed a similar degree of literary and artistic licence in marketing their wares: they made effective use of adjectives, describing Manitoba winters, for example, as “bracing” and “invigorating,” and tended to overestimate the abundance of the soil; they placed great emphasis on the availability of “free” homesteads, but said little of the necessity of having sufficient capital to operate a farm; they implied that a practical knowledge of agriculture was less important than the possession of grit, pluck, and other Victorian virtues. But for all of that, official publications were rarely guilty of wilful misrepresentation, gross exaggeration, and outright lies, for the government recognized the damage that could result from misleading advertisements. In particular, they recognized that disillusioned settlers, who had been lured to Canada by overly rosy descriptions of the West, would inevitably communicate their sense of grievance and dissatisfaction to relatives, friends, and often the press in Britain; such unfavourable publicity might easily deter emigration

15 Macdonald, *Canada*, p. 32, citing a Department of Agriculture directive to Agent A.C. Buchanan, c. 1872. Although Macdonald's scholarship is sound, his citations are most vexing. He uses a bewildering array of unexplained initials and numerals to refer to documents in RG 17 at the PAC.

16 *SP*, 1872 (no. 2A), p. 87.

17 Macdonald, *Canada*, p. 37.

18 PABC, GR 526, vol. 7, file 2, Sproat to Provincial Secretary, 5 April 1873.



Figure 1: *Frontispiece from G.M. Sproat's British Columbia: Information For Emigrants (London, 1873). The engraving is based on a lithograph (see figure 2) published by Day & Sons, London, 1860, from an original drawing by Herman Otto Tiedemann. Certain elements — notably an Indian village and Indian canoe — were omitted from this engraving; Sproat also widened the harbour and cleared some of the trees from the foreshore, so as to provide “a lightsome view” of Victoria for prospective settlers.* Courtesy: Provincial Archives of British Columbia.

from a particular area in Britain to Canada for as long as twenty years.¹⁹ With this in mind, the Immigration Branch endeavoured to ensure that its publications were for the most part credible and reliable. It was a wise course of action, one that resulted in the Dominion being held up by the British government to other colonies as a model in terms of “the versatility and the excellence of [its] advice to emigrants and settlers.”²⁰

Whether this promotional literature actually had the desired effect, however, is another question. In all likelihood, the literature probably had a limited impact, at least during the early years of the campaign, for several reasons. In the first place, when the Dominion initiated its campaign, Canada was still *terra incognita* to the vast majority of Britons. One agent reported in 1872 that

19 This was the opinion of the Rt. Hon. John Burns, M.P., chairman of the Board of Emigration Commissioners and responsible for the Emigrants' Information Office in London. The office had been established by the Board of Trade in 1881 to monitor the recruiting activities of the British colonies and various foreign states and to provide emigrants with accurate, impartial information. The office went to considerable lengths to expose misleading advertisements issued by foreign or colonial agents in the United Kingdom. *SP*, 1907 (no. 58) Minutes of the Proceedings of the Colonial Conference, p. 173.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

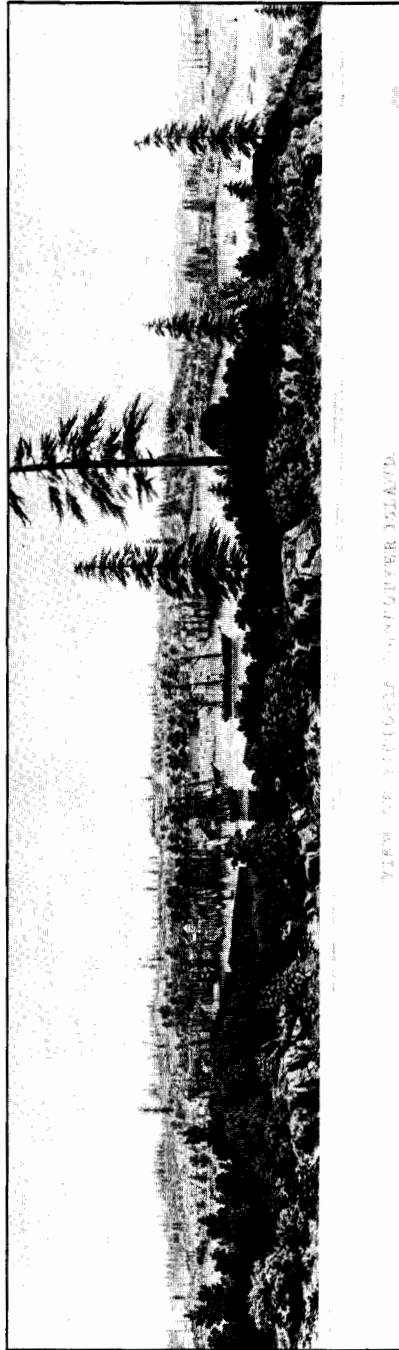


Figure 2: *The Day & Sons lithograph of Victoria harbour published in 1860 which G.M. Sprout altered for use in British Columbia: Information for Emigrants (London, 1873). The Indian village and canoe can be seen in the foreground on the left. Courtesy: Provincial Archives of British Columbia.*

fully 90 per cent of the people he met on his circuit had no idea of Canada's location, let alone its extent, resources, or land policies; another agent remarked that nothing was more striking than "the utter ignorance existing in the rural districts of England" as far as Canada was concerned; a third spoke in 1873 of the "great ignorance displayed about Canada" and the general indifference on the part of Englishmen towards topics concerning the Dominion. "All the talk seems to be about America," he said, "America is everything, and appears to be everywhere."²¹ It took over a decade of sustained effort by Dominion publicists to deflect the British public's preoccupation with the United States and educate it to the advantages of the Dominion. Secondly, until the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and the opening of the West, Canada simply could not compete on equal terms with the United States: only when an efficient transportation network was in place would the Canadian frontier be presented as a lucrative, and accessible, field of settlement. Finally, and of great importance, the degree of literacy among the labouring classes of Britain was low in the 1870s. As a result, the edifying descriptions contained in the tightly printed immigration brochures were wasted on many audiences. Indeed, in the 1870s, it was not unusual for agents to distribute their literature at a public lecture, and then proceed to *read* the brochures to their uncomprehending audience.²² This state of affairs was largely remedied by W.E. Forster's *Education Act* of 1870 which introduced compulsory elementary education in England and Wales. Within a decade, the literacy rate had climbed significantly.

This *Act*, coupled with technological advances in the printing industry, sparked an "information revolution" akin to that which we are experiencing today. An immense number of new periodicals flooded British newsstands in the 1880s, and for the first time circulation figures of individual magazines and newspapers exceeded one million.²³ The Dominion government capitalized on this "reading revolution" and in the early 1880s it began to advertise regularly in several mass circulation periodicals. In conjunction with the CPR, the government also began its practice of sending journalists and newspaper editors on expense-paid trips to Western Canada, with the hope that these guests would write favourable reports after returning to Britain. The government was not usually disappointed. In addition, the spirit of the eighties manifested itself in a number of new publications designed to appeal directly to selected immigrant groups. The most popular and, arguably, the most successful of these new publications was an eighty-page pamphlet entitled *What Farmers Say of their Personal Experience in the Canadian North-West*. This pamphlet, which remained in print under slightly different titles for many years, provides a good example of how the federal government cooperated with that other major landowner in Western Canada, the CPR.

21 *Ibid.*, 1873 (no. 26), pp. 100, 144, 150.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

23 See Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago, 1957); and Alan J. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press, 1855-1914* (London, 1976).

The CPR opened its emigration office in London in 1881.²⁴ Three years later, the office was put in charge of the indefatigable Alexander Begg (1839-1897), journalist, novelist, fur-trader, steamboat agent, and one-time civil servant in Manitoba.²⁵ Begg's experience as an agent in Fort Garry and as editor of various Manitoba trade publications had convinced him that the best way of attracting hesitant emigrants was to provide them with honest testimonials from contented countrymen already resident in the West. His was not a new idea, since similar schemes had been carried out earlier, but he improved on the idea and developed it on a large scale.

Begg began in 1884 with a two-page circular containing forty-five questions. Directed to settlers in southern Manitoba, Assiniboia, and Alberta, the circulars asked settlers to state their names, nationalities, previous place of residence, year of arrival in the North-West, and amount of capital they brought with them. They were also asked to provide information on the current value of their farms, the cost of living, and a wide range of questions concerning their crops and agricultural practices. With the assistance of the Dominion Post Office, the circulars were sent to every postmaster in the West, whence they were distributed to local farmers.²⁶ Completed questionnaires were then returned to Begg's office in London, where they were sorted on the basis of the respondents' national origins. Questionnaires completed by British-born homesteaders provided the basis for the pamphlet, *What Farmers Say*.

The pamphlet was published by both the CPR and the Department of Agriculture. Both versions contained a general commentary and both were arranged thematically. That is to say, one section of the pamphlet offered "Farmers' Testimony Respecting the Climate;" other sections dealt with "Farmers' Testimony Respecting the Soil," "Grasses and Hay," "Wintering of Livestock," and so forth. Each section was preceded by the names and addresses of those who had provided the information. The total effect was a well-organized, thoughtful, authoritative document calculated to inspire confidence in Canada among British agriculturalists.

The original questionnaires circulated by Begg are, by great fortune, preserved in the Provincial Archives of British Columbia.²⁷ The original documents provide an unique opportunity of comparing the primary data with the published product. To the credit of Begg and his government partners, a comparison of the two shows that the respondents' remarks were not appreciably altered. Some were edited for brevity, others corrected grammatically, but for the most part the pamphlets conveyed the farmers' own words.

24 James B. Hedges, *Building the Canadian West: The Land and Colonization Policies of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (New York, 1971).

25 Madge Wolfenden, "Alexander Begg versus Alexander Begg," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 1 (April 1937), pp. 133-34, 137-38.

26 Hedges, *Building the Canadian West*, pp. 96-98.

27 PABC, Add. MSS. 467. In addition to the CPR questionnaires, the Begg collection includes letterbook copies of his correspondence and a manuscript copy of his *History of the North-West* (1894-1895). The provenance of this material is unknown; however, Begg died in Victoria in 1897 and it is possible that before dying he donated these papers, along with a large number of pamphlets, to the newly established Provincial Archives of British Columbia.

This is not to say that Begg printed all of the replies he received: only those questionnaires that were favourable or complimentary to the West appeared in print. Critical and, in some cases, comical replies were set aside as being unsuitable. Among those omitted was that of a Kentish man who resided near Beulah, Manitoba. In reply to the question, "How do you usually spend time during winter?" the man wrote: "Trying to keep warm." In answer to a question concerning his overall opinion of the West, he wrote: "Damn fraud." Begg scrawled the word "Biased" across this questionnaire. Then there was the ex-Dubliner at Fish Creek who, in reply to the question "Which is the best time for breaking the virgin soil?" wrote: "In my opinion, night is the best time to break in a virgin, but if opportunity favoured, anytime would do: I would not be particular;" and, in answer to the question about how he spent his time during the winter, he confessed: "Oh, driving around and seeing the neighbours, and drinking whisky when it's to be had, but between you and me, that is seldom. More's the pity." Across this questionnaire, an undoubtedly disgusted Begg wrote "Bad Egg" and "Humbug".²⁸ It should be noted, though, that such replies were rare. Of the hundreds of settlers who replied to the questionnaires, the majority were enthusiastic about their prospects in the West.

The following year, 1885, Begg and the Department of Agriculture repeated the exercise. They also sent out specially designed questionnaires for the women of the West. Women were asked for their opinions on the climate, on local schools, and whether they experienced "any dread of Indians." As well, respondents were asked to "kindly give any advice that may be of service to incoming mothers, wives, daughters, sisters and any practical information or any household receipt that may be of service to them." The completed questionnaires were arranged in the same way as those sent to male homesteaders and were used to compile another attractive, agreeable, popular pamphlet entitled *What Women Say of the Canadian North-West*. These pamphlets did much to dispel the image of the West as being a forbidding wilderness. In fact, so successful were the pamphlets that the Immigration Branch subsequently published several other brochures aimed specifically at women.²⁹

Having designated women as a special interest group, and having recognized the importance of their opinions in the decision to emigrate, the government focused its attention on British children. The idea of using children in the recruiting campaign originated in 1892, the year when responsibility for immigration was transferred from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of the Interior. Early that year the CPR's colonization department had held a competition among the public schools of the Maritime provinces. Students between twelve and fifteen years of age had been invited by the railway to write essays on the resources of the prairie West, a prize of fifty dollars being awarded to the best paper in each of the three provinces. The company hoped that the prize money would be used by the students and their families to migrate to the North

28 *Ibid.*, box 1, vol. II, #71 and #27.

29 *Ibid.*, box 2, vol. III; PAC, RG 76, vol. 157, file 39604 (1897), microfilm reel C-7303. Selections from *What Women Say of the Canadian North-West* (1886) may be found in Susan Jackel, ed., *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty: British Emigrant Gentlewomen in the Canadian West, 1880-1914* (Vancouver, 1982).

West Territories. Thomas Daly, the Minister of the Interior, followed the competition with great interest and in 1893 he requested Canada's High Commissioner, Sir Charles Tupper, to sponsor a similar contest among the students of Great Britain and Ireland.³⁰

For several years previously, Sir Charles had been lobbying British education authorities to introduce more instruction in Canadian history and geography into the elementary school curriculum. Initially, his request met with little success, but in the early 1890s, amid growing imperial enthusiasms in Britain, a few courses dealing with the resources of the Empire had been introduced. Sir Charles' school essay contest, therefore, was well received by British educational groups, who appreciated its imperial value.³¹ The first prize of five pounds sterling was doubtless appreciated, for more pragmatic reasons, by the youthful contestants.

Despite its success, the essay contests were not repeated until 1900. By that time, the Liberal party was in office and Laurier's energetic Minister of the Interior, Clifford Sifton, was looking for new ways to advertise the Dominion. Sifton's deputy, James Smart, suggested that they revive the essay contests. Smart intended, however, to organize the contests on a much grander scale than before. With the assistance of Tupper's successor, Lord Strathcona, he sent Canadian atlases and large wall maps of the Dominion to every school in Britain. Next, he commissioned Edward Peacock, at that time a teacher at Upper Canada College in Toronto, to write a book entitled *Canada: A Descriptive Text-book*.³² The book was to be used as the main reference work for the essays and copies were distributed freely to every school child in Britain. It was an inspired idea for, as Smart hoped, the children took their assignments home, where the atlases and the textbooks came to the attention of their parents. Inspired, too, were the bronze medallions which were presented as prizes. Embellished with Canada's coat-of-arms and accompanied by a certificate of merit from Lord Strathcona, the medals served two purposes. First, they served as incentives to the ninety-thousand school children who participated in the contest.³³ Afterwards, displayed proudly by the winning students from each class in every school throughout the length and breadth of Britain, they served as yet another advertisement for the young Dominion. Altogether, it was one of the most successful schemes ever undertaken by the Immigration Branch. "It taught us a lesson," a branch official told an Australian newspaper correspondent in 1907, "And [since then] we [have] never lost touch with the schools."³⁴

30 PAC, RG 76, vol. 48, file 1781, microfilm reel C-4711, Lynwode Pereira to J.G. Colmer, 14 November 1893.

31 *Ibid.*, Charles Tupper to T. Mayne Daly, 27 July 1894.

32 Peacock's book was also used in a similar contest in 1900 sponsored by a British juvenile weekly, *Boys of Our Empire*. First prize was a "free kit, free passage, and a free start in the Canadian West." See Patrick A. Dunae, "'Making Good': The Canadian West in British Boys' Literature, 1890-1914," *Prairie Forum* 4 (1979), pp. 165-81.

33 PAC, RG 76, vol. 48, file 1781, Strathcona to James Smart, 15 March 1901.

34 *Canadian Annual Review* (1908), p. 290.

It is apparent from the Immigration Branch records in the Public Archives of Canada that Lord Strathcona played a large part in this and in other recruiting campaigns. It is apparent, too, from the records of various emigration leagues in Britain that Strathcona was active in promoting the Dominion at every possible turn.³⁵ Immigration historians, however, have not been kind to him. This may be the result of the scurrilous remarks made by W.T.R. Preston in his book, *My Generation of Politics and Politicians* (1927). Preston had been appointed by Sifton in 1898 to oversee a new Immigration Agency in London, which had been established as a separate office from the High Commission. Unfortunately, Preston and the High Commissioner were not personally compatible and, while they both reported to the Minister of the Interior, they often worked at cross purposes. An unsavoury, malodorous character by most standards,³⁶ Preston was not content to simply ridicule Strathcona's work in his reports to Ottawa. He also launched a scathing attack on Strathcona in his aforementioned memoir and in a biography of Strathcona which was published in 1914, a few months after the peer's death. In the former work, Preston intimated that the records of the London agency were chaotic and incriminating:³⁷

When I went into the records of the office on the question of Immigration, very interesting information of the dead and buried type came to light. Recommendations dating from the time of Sir John A. Macdonald's regime had been made, but a spirit of *laissez-faire* had taken possession of everyone concerned and nothing of any account had ever been done. . . .

In Strathcona's biography, Preston claimed that the High Commissioner's office in London, responsible for immigration propaganda since 1880, had accomplished absolutely nothing. "The results to the Dominion were *nil*," he declared. As for Lord Strathcona, Preston wrote: "He had no more to do with the magnificent work that was done to rouse an interest throughout the emigrating world to the advantages of Canada than had the men who aimlessly haunt the Embankment, parks, or squares of London."³⁸ Preston's charges were patently untrue and it is regrettable that they have persisted for so many years.

Still, like many an unctuous salesman, Preston was effective in promoting the Dominion in Great Britain, and during his years in London, Canada did score some impressive triumphs. For example, the Coronation Arch of 1902 — sixty feet high, electrically illuminated, and covered with Manitoba Red Fife

35 Strathcona's name crops up constantly in the published reports of such organizations as the Boys' Empire League, the Public Schools' Emigration League, the East End Emigration League, and sundry other organizations (the records of which are to be found in the British Library, London). An indication of his activities may be gleaned from Beckles Wilson's eulogistic biography, *The Life of Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal* (London, 1915).

36 D.J. Hall, *Clifford Sifton*, vol. 1, *The Young Napoleon, 1861-1900* (Vancouver, 1981), p. 261.

37 W.T.R. Preston, *My Generation of Politics and Politicians* (Toronto, 1927), p. 218.

38 Preston, *Lord Strathcona* (London, 1914), pp. 236-37, 240-41.

wheat — was constructed under Preston's direction.³⁹ He also had a hand in inaugurating Canada's motorized exhibition van, which in the early 1900s caused a sensation wherever it travelled.⁴⁰ But as far as the printed media are concerned, credit for introducing novel and innovative techniques belongs to James Smart and to William J. White, Inspector of Canadian immigration agencies in the United States. In 1902, Smart and White combined forces to revitalize Canadian advertising in Britain.⁴¹ They were unquestionably successful and, as several marketing journals commented at the time, they placed Canada in the forefront of the advertising world.⁴²

Of Smart and White's many accomplishments, perhaps the most notable was to give the Dominion an advertising symbol, one that was distinctly Canadian and that was readily recognized throughout Britain. They chose as their logo the maple leaf which, set on a diagonal banner, appeared on virtually all of Canada's poster and newspaper advertisements. They were also responsible for Canada's visually arresting advertisements in the popular press. Discarding the old one-inch notices, confined in a single column of type, they substituted three-inch advertisements that ran horizontally across two or three columns of type. It was a small but decidedly effective change. They also experimented with scientific marketing surveys. In the process, they discovered that it was expensive and ineffective to run advertisements all the year round; rather, the best time for advertising Canada was in the autumn and winter months, when British agriculturalists had more leisure time and were more disposed to read magazines and newspapers. Again, it was a small but significant innovation.⁴³

In addition, Smart and White stylized and modernized the immigration brochures and promotional pamphlets. Instead of sober, dour tracts bearing ponderous titles, they issued breezy, coloured publications entitled *Canada in a Nutshell*, *Prosperity Follows Settlement*, and *The Last Best West*.⁴⁴ Similarly, they made effective use of billboards and hoardings which were erected at major

39 The celebrated Coronation Arch is documented in RG 76, vol. 258, file 198190, pt. 1 (1902), microfilm reel C-7807. A photograph of the Arch is reproduced in Jean Bruce's *The Last Best West* (Toronto, 1976), p. 22; and in Bill McKee and Georgeen Klassen, *Trail of Iron: The CPR & the Birth of the West* (Vancouver, 1983), p. 116.

40 For details on the exhibition van, see RG 76, vol. 109, file 21074, pt. 1 (1895-1907), reel microfilm C-4772. This advertising device is also illustrated in Bruce's book, p. 3.

41 Although White was Inspector of Agencies in the United States, he accompanied Smart on the deputy's "fact-finding" tour of Britain in 1902. Correspondence and reports generated during that trip reveal that White was instrumental in revamping and revitalizing advertising in Britain. RG 76, vol. 126, file 28128, pts. 1-3 (1902), microfilm reel C-4789. White's promotional work in the U.S. is discussed in Harold Martin Troper, *Only Farmers Need Apply: Official Canadian Government Encouragement of Immigration from the United States, 1896-1911* (Toronto, 1972).

42 The trade periodical, *Progressive Advertising* (17 October 1902), commended the Dominion for being "fully alive to the possibilities of advertising;" another industry journal, *Advertising World* (March 1902), complimented Canadian pamphlets for being "breezy but business-like," and for being free of "official [i.e. bureaucratic] English and red-tape-ism."

43 PAC, RG 76, vol. 126, file 28128 (1902), microfilm reel C-4789.

44 Some of these publications are examined in Klaus Peter Stitch, "'Canada's Century': The Rhetoric of Propaganda," *Prairie Forum* 1 (April 1976), pp. 19-30.

intersections and at other prominent locations. Their keen sense of location also accounted for the government's decision to find a new site for its London agency in 1902. "Proper advertising," Smart declared,

is the most efficient instrument to use in endeavouring to induce the movement of population from Great Britain to Canada, and there would appear to be no better means for a good advertisement than the location of the Immigration Offices in the very centre of one of the thoroughfares of London.

After surveying several sites, Smart decided on Charing Cross, near Trafalgar Square, the busiest street corner in all of London.⁴⁵

Along with their other accomplishments, Smart and White pioneered the use of slogans — a conventional advertising technique today, but one that was still relatively new and unrefined in the Edwardian years. Under their direction, London, Manchester, Liverpool, and the other principal cities of Britain were festooned with large coloured posters, proclaiming: "CANADA — BRITAIN'S GRANARY," "Happy Homes, Healthy Climate, Bountiful Harvests — UNDER THE FLAG," or simply "THERE'S ELBOW ROOM OUT THERE!"⁴⁶

Smart stepped down from his office in 1905, following Sifton's resignation from the cabinet; he was succeeded by W.W. Cory who was responsible in turn to the new minister, Frank Oliver. Both men continued the programmes initiated by Smart. In fact, the government's budget for advertising in the United Kingdom was increased, from approximately twelve thousand dollars in 1901 to over sixteen thousand dollars in 1907. The staff in the various British agencies increased, too, from a total of eighteen in 1901 to almost fifty in 1911. Later, under Borden's Conservative administration, the staff grew to almost seventy with an annual budget, exclusive of wages, of almost twenty thousand dollars.⁴⁷ And the "hard-sell" continued as well, even after the outbreak of war in 1914, when Canadian posters proclaimed: "There is No Age Limit for Farming in CANADA. If you CANNOT FIGHT You Can HELP TO FEED THE EMPIRE."

But with the start of the First World War, emigration from Great Britain to Canada fell dramatically. From over 150,000 in 1913, it dropped to 140,000 in 1914, to 40,000 in 1915, and to just over 8,000 the year after.⁴⁸ By that time, over two-thirds of the men employed by the Immigration Branch overseas were on active service, with most of the rest either in the Home Guard or engaged in wartime industry. There was also a growing feeling in London that continued advertising was "unpatriotic," in view of the more pressing demands of the war effort. Accordingly, in October 1915, the Deputy Minister of the Interior

45 PAC, RG 76, vol. 242, file 155552, pt. 1, microfilm reel C-7391: Excerpts from report by J.A. Smart, January 1902.

46 *Ibid.*, vol. 125, file 28128.

47 *Ibid.*, vol. 112, file 2272, pt. 4 (1915); vol. 125, file 28128, pt. 4; vol. 221, file 103005; and SP, 1901-1915, Public Accounts.

48 *Canada Year Book* (Ottawa, 1917), p. 112.



Figure 3: *Canadian Government Emigration Offices, Charing Cross, London, 1911. Outside, the office displayed alluring posters with snappy slogans; inside, officials provided prospective emigrants with brochures, handbooks, maps, and encouragement.* Courtesy: Public Archives of Canada, C-63257.

ordered the London office to suspend the recruiting drive which had been underway for over half a century.⁴⁹ Not until after the war, and under the new Department of Immigration and Colonization established in 1917, was advertising resumed on a large scale. Yet, while postwar immigration from Britain was substantial, the Dominion's campaign for British immigrants was never again as intense, as diverse, as dynamic, or as flamboyant.

* * *

The success or failure of Canada's promotional campaign is difficult to determine. Norman Macdonald, referring to what he called the government's "pathetic faith in advertising," argued that propaganda was far less important than "pull" factors — notably prevailing economic opportunities in Canada — as far as immigration was concerned.⁵⁰ Other historians have stressed the importance of "push" factors — such as agricultural depressions, high unemployment, urban crowding, and lack of social mobility in Britain.⁵¹ Certainly there is evidence to support both views. But to measure the advertisements against other factors in the emigration equation adds little to our understanding of these records. A more relevant exercise begins with the question: how potent were the promotional documents used in the government's campaign? In other words, did they succeed as advertisements?

49 PAC, RG 76, vol. 125, file 28128, pt. 8, microfilm reel C-4789, W.D. Scott to W.W. Cory, 8 October 1915.

50 Macdonald, *Canada*, p. 31.

51 Rowland T. Berthoff, *British Immigrants in Industrial America, 1790-1950* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953); and Edwin C. Guillet, *The Great Migration* (Toronto, 1963), among others.

To answer these questions, it is necessary to understand the nature of advertising and the essence, or purpose, of promotion. Advertisements are not intended to create markets. It is human needs that lie behind market demands. Rather, advertising and promotion are described by the marketing industry as “facilitating functions” and as “channels of communication between seller and buyer.”⁵² If we measure the promotional documents against this yardstick, then there can be little doubt that they were successful. In the absence of other media, they served admirably as “channels of communication” between the Dominion and Britons who were disposed to emigrate: not only did they publicize Canada’s resources, they also communicated official policies respecting transportation, homestead laws, and a host of other matters of interest to the emigrant. At the same time, they operated in a “facilitating” manner, by drawing emigrants’ attention to that part of Canada which the government most wanted to settle — the West.

When assessing these documents — and, for that matter, the whole immigration campaign — it is important, too, to remember the product which the government was promoting. Immigration agents and support personnel were not selling a bar of soap, a loaf of bread, or some other minor commodity. They were selling an entirely new way of life to members of a long established, relatively insular community: they were trying to convince Britons to leave all that was familiar (however frustrating or aggravating that might have been) for a new life in a land thousands of miles distant. In order to sell Canada’s brand of this “commodity,” Dominion promoters had to wage a consistent campaign, with advertisements that would excite interest and inspire confidence. For the most part, the Immigration Branch succeeded on both counts.

Indeed, as we have seen, Canadian immigration authorities showed considerable acumen in their recruiting drives in Britain during the Victorian-Edwardian years. Even during the 1870s, when funds, staff, and the media were limited, the Immigration Branch and its allies managed to keep the Dominion prominently before the British public. Later, under more favourable circumstances, the branch was able to expand its range of activities and so raise the Dominion’s profile even further. In the process, the government developed and deployed marketing techniques which were the envy of many other colonies and countries then competing for British emigrants.

In waging its campaign, the Dominion was fortunate in having the services of individuals who appreciated the dynamics of promotion and understood the kinds of advertisements that would facilitate the settlement process, especially in the Canadian West. Ultimately, though, the success of the whole operation depended on the effective use of records: hence this foray into the records’ history. Letters between government officials and agents overseas, departmental reports, settlers’ questionnaires and letters, agents’ day books, expense accounts, and publishing contracts — these records, which may seem to be of a routine nature, were in fact key elements in an elaborate, ambitious communications network established for the purpose of projecting an enticing image

52 Edward L. Brink and William T. Kelley, *The Management of Promotion: Consumer Behaviour and Demand Stimulation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1963), p. 6.

of Canada to the outside world. Placed alongside the pamphlets, posters, and other actual promotional documents used in the campaign, they reveal much about how the government viewed prospective settlers and about the way the country perceived itself.